Patrick White and Theodora Goodman in New Mexico

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IN JUNE 1939, SHORTLY BEFORE THE OUTBREAK OF WORLD War II, Patrick White was in New Mexico for several weeks (Marr 185). Nine years later, in his third novel, *The Aunt's Story* (1948), he told the story of a spinster, Theodora Goodman, who is returning from France to Australia through America when, apparently on whim, she gets off the train in a small pueblo and tears up her return tickets. The novel ends with her being taken to a mental home, where she will spend the rest of her days. The novel is set in 1939, the year White was in the United States, and the place is New Mexico.

Having crossed the continent from New York to Los Angeles, White stopped in New Mexico on his way back East in order to make a sort of pilgrimage to D. H. Lawrence's shrine at his ranch north of Taos (Marr 183). He would have had to change trains at Lamy and take a branch line to Santa Fe eighteen miles away, for Santa Fe was not directly on the transcontinental rail line.[1] He would have taken a bus north to Taos, for Taos has never had a rail connection. It is clearly Taos, however, where Theodora is to be pictured getting off the train, though no train has ever gone there: White modified the geography for artistic effect. A small settlement, Taos was already a notable art colony in the 1920s, centered around Mabel Dodge Luhan, not around Lawrence as Marr suggests (183). Mabel, a wealthy New Yorker, had moved to Taos in 1917, embracing Indian culture when she married a local Indian, Tony Luhan. Her colony of artist friends was well established before she invited Lawrence there in November 1921. He accepted and arrived in Taos in September 1922. Taos as seen through Theodora's eyes is "pink, mostly, of baked mud, an earth pink" (255). Adobe-style houses in terracotta colors are the most distinctive characteristic of New Mexican architecture. The first human presence that Theodora encounters is a "thin, dark, perhaps an Indian woman, or a Mexican." Shortly afterwards a woman who notices Theodora sitting there directs her to a guesthouse "with individual cabins, where people went, and artists, [. . .] and an Indian pueblo," the famous multistoried pueblo of Taos, the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States. ("Pueblo," incidentally, is a New Mexican word; it is not used in Arizona.)

White was most immediately attracted to New Mexico through his interest in D. H. Lawrence, who spent three years there (1922 through 1925); but Patrick and Theodora are also linked in important ways to the New Mexico of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Huxley had not yet visited New Mexico when he set part of *Brave New World* there—he got his information from his friend D. H. Lawrence and from his own reading—but he and his wife Maria did spend several weeks with Lawrence's widow Frieda at her ranch, San Cristóbal, in 1937, just two years before White visited the area.[2]

Lawrence's ranch is not easy to get to, being some twenty miles further north of Taos. In order to ensure access to Lawrence's shrine, where his ashes are embedded in concrete to prevent theft, White must have had some means of introduction, whether to Frieda Lawrence, or, likely enough, to Spud Johnson. Spud was an important literary figure in Mabel Dodge Luhan's circle of artists, who all knew Lawrence well; Spud had accompanied Lawrence in Mexico City when he visited it in 1923 (Udall). Joseph Foster, in *D. H. Lawrence in Taos*, says that Spud was an ideal companion for Lawrence since he never said anything to disagree with the strong-minded Lawrence: "Spud was the only living man who did not annoy Lawrence. [. . .] Spud was a sweet, faintly poetic soul" (68–69). White was a young man of 27, still unpublished (he was in America in search of a publisher for *Happy Valley*), and was no doubt impressed by the fact that Spud, fifteen years his senior, was an intimate of Lawrence. Spud and Patrick quickly became lovers, and even though their brief, intense affair did not survive separation, they maintained a correspondence until 1945. According to Marr, it was Dorothy Brett, another member of Mabel's circle and an old friend of Lawrence's who took Patrick to San Cristóbal to meet Frieda (Marr 183). But Huxley reported Brett as profoundly deaf in 1937, two years previously (Murray 305), so it is likely that someone else went with them to help communication, perhaps Spud himself. Frieda, when she learned that Patrick

was a writer, would almost certainly have mentioned the Huxleys' visit in 1937.

Although White spent much more time in New York and Massachusetts, it was New Mexico that stayed in his mind and that he returned to in *The Aunt's Story*. It was because New Mexico had such vivid memories and stimulating experiences for him that Theodora got off the train there and not elsewhere. White saw topological similarities between the New Mexican landscape and the Monaro district south of Canberra where he worked as a jackeroo before returning to England in 1932,[3] and so Theodora too is made to feel an affinity between the New Mexican landscape and the black volcanic hills of Meroë, her father's estate in Australia.[4] She elects to stay in the New Mexican Meroë rather than return to "Abyssinia" (a homonym for the abyss in ya), the term she uses for Australia in a letter to her sister Fanny (251), but she is no longer capable of finding peace anywhere.

But was it just to visit the Lawrence ranch that White stopped in New Mexico? Or was his curiosity also whetted by his reading of *Brave New World*, in which New Mexico plays an important role? The life lived in the isolated Indian pueblo of Malpaís, where unhappiness is accepted as part of life and sexual commitment and marriage are respected, is offered as the alternative to the tranquilized, sexually unrestrained, consumer-oriented society of Huxley's brave new world. John Savage, removed from Malpaís and brought into the wider world, is so repelled by its values that he commits suicide. His situation is reflected in Theodora's at the end of *The Aunt's Story*. Unable to function in the ordinary world, she is reduced to a symbol, the black rose on her hat, capable perhaps of glittering and trembling at times (281).

One could assume that White read the Huxley novel in the 1930s, for it was famous and enormously popular; but the assumption becomes fact through an unmistakable verbal link, Theodora's use of the word "pneumatic" in the Huxleyan sense as she is about to be taken away to a mental home: "You Americans [. . .] make life positively pneumatic" (281). This use of the word, applied to anything well-padded, links Theodora's future life to the somatized world of Huxley's novel, where "pneumatic" is almost a leitmotif. Huxley uses the word especially of a slightly plump woman, well-padded for a comfortable (if empty) sexual experience.[5] Theodora, and her creator Patrick White, use the word to mean a well-cushioned lifestyle, sharing Huxley's strong reservations about the kind of comfort offered.

The Taos that Theodora steps into and remains in, then, is the Taos that Patrick White experienced, which was essentially the Taos cultural colony that Mabel Dodge Luhan created. Among her friends was, most notably for Patrick, Spud Johnson, who became Patrick's lover, who was intimate with D.H. Lawrence, who had met Aldous Huxley in 1937 and Willa Cather when she visited Mabel back in 1925, and who was a close friend of Georgia O'Keeffe. O'Keeffe, originally a New Yorker like Mabel, observed "Once you have experienced New Mexico, it will continue to itch at you for the rest of your life."

It was Lawrence's accounts of New Mexico that captured Huxley's imagination and led him to locate the alternative to his dystopic utopia there in *Brave New World* (6.2). Not having been to New Mexico, Huxley makes many mistakes. For instance, he locates his reservation in Malpaís, which did not exist as a pueblo, and describes Easter ceremonies that belonged to the New Mexican Penitentes and to Sicily, but not to the indigenous Indians, as taking place in summer. But these things do not matter, other than pointing to Huxley's limited knowledge of New Mexico, which interested him mostly for its literary possibilities of suggesting an alternative to the horror of his utopia. After he encountered New Mexico firsthand during his three-week stay with Frieda, Huxley did not use it again in any of his novels.

But there is something special about New Mexico that led all three writers, White, Lawrence, and Huxley, to exempt it from their general criticism of American culture. In 1925, Lawrence recorded his impression of American culture as superficial and the people as suspicious. In *Jesting Pilate*, Huxley referred to Los Angeles as Joy City, and White in *The Aunt's Story* depicted an America preoccupied with making money. Theodora's fellow passenger on the train, we are told, scrabbles on the surface of life as he relates his rise from poverty to financial security and reels off statistics of population growth and increasing production: "he talked, and heard his own voice made small" (249). The corn song that Theodora imagines, reading off its notation in the telephone wires as the train advances, represents a confident trumpeting of the nation itself and its people (253).

But whatever the nature of their disapproval of American culture, Lawrence loved New Mexico and his ashes were returned to Taos from Venice, where he died in the company of the Huxleys; Huxley did settle permanently in America after he went on to Hollywood from Frieda's ranch; and White remarked that he might well have stayed in America but for the outbreak of World War II (Marr 190–91). What New Mexico chiefly represented for these writers was an alternative to the decadence of an exhausted Europe and to the empty materialism of America. Theodora's abandonment of Europe after consigning it to a vast conflagration of her imagining was an expression of White's own disillusionment with his life there. Still uncertain himself about returning to a culturally immature Australia as he was writing *The Aunt's Story* in 1946, White allowed Theodora to remain in her New Mexican Meroë. ❑

Notes

1. Howard Bryson, in "the Coming of the Railroad," records that New Mexico was linked by rail to both coasts in 1880, but the Atchison Topeka and the Santa Fe never passed through Atchison, Topeka, or Santa Fe (Scheck 2–4).

2. Lawrence and Huxley became friends in 1915 when they met at Garsington Manor, the home of Lady Ottoline Morrell in Oxfordshire (Murray). They also became acquainted there with Dorothy Brett, who preceded them to Taos.

3. A jackeroo is "a young man (usu. English and of independent means) gaining experience by working as a supernumerary on a sheep or cattle station." *The Australian Oxford Dictionary*. Ed. Bruce Moore. Melbourne: OUP, 1999.

4. Meroë was the capital city of the Kingdom, which flourished between the sixth century B.C. and the fourth century A.D. It was located on the Nile, in what is now northern Sudan. White was in that area during World War II. When I wrote in 1974 asking him "Why the name Meroë?" he answered rather vaguely that it was one of those dark, mysterious-sounding names that appealed to him. It sounds like a Greek word, and it may be that his ultimate association was with Greece, where he would have elected to stay, like Theodora in New Mexico, if Manoly Lascaris, his companion in life, had not persuaded him to return to Australia.

5. Huxley took up the word from T. S. Eliot's "Whispers of Immortality" (*Poems* 1920): "Uncorseted, her friendly bust / Gives promise of pneumatic bliss"). But Eliot used it just the once, whereas Huxley made it famous. What Eliot and Huxley have in common, under their surface amused tolerance, is a discernible sexual distaste.

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Louise Oxley

Division

On the evening of the hearing she began again
by teaching me to chop an onion,
her fingers strangely bare of rings and colored
at the swell and buckle of each joint. Unhurried
hands, they lifted like fish-heavy herons
from the pale pool of her apron.
She halved her globe along the longitude
where a stilled flame glowed greenish-white inside
or palms cupped to palms, a Buddhist prayer.
The severed hemisphere
she held face down and sliced, cut after cut,
the fingers arched like knees and opening out
to this certain fact of disappearing smoothness
and solidity. "Make a half-turn like this"
she said, "and go on as before." With her old bent-
bladed knife, foreshortened in some other accident,
she was raising hell—crystals of stinging flesh
that gave her tears and the harsh
heady after-smell of my father's sweat.

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